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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000613

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TAGS: PREL PGOV RS

SUBJECT: PUTIN IN MUNICH: SHARP TONE, BUT FAMILIAR

COMPLAINTS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Putin's February 10 remarks to the Munich Conference on Security Policy were a familiar litany of complaints about Russia's treatment by the West, and particularly the U.S. The substance of his critique of the dangers of unilateral U.S. actions, NATO enlargement, and ballistic missile defense, as well as his offers to cooperate on nonproliferation and energy security, broke no new ground. The sharp tone of his delivery did. Putin's biting tone was viewed in Moscow as an effort to lay down markers that a resurgent Russia's interests must be respected. The Ambassador has reiterated our disappointment over the remarks with Acting Foreign Minister Denisov. End Summary.

SETTING THE SCENE

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¶2. (SBU) Putin arrived in Munich aggrieved over mounting Western complaints about Russia's heavy-handed energy tactics and its democratic track record. He, like many Russians of his generation, remains acutely aware of Moscow's inability over the past decade to derail NATO enlargement or U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense. Russians' selective reading of Secretary Gates' February 7 testimony on Capitol Hill had

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already set off a media firestorm in Moscow. The official reaction was measured -- Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov tried to spin Gates' remarks as a standard approach that defense ministers took when submitting a budget. However, the balance of opinion was that the remarks reflected "Cold War thinking" that presaged a "new axis of evil." A congenitally paranoid press pushed the view that this was all part of a Western effort to contain a resurgent Russia that has resumed its rightful position in the world after Moscow's weakness during the nineties.

PUTIN'S REMARKS IN MUNICH

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¶3. (SBU) On February 10 in Munich, Putin reiterated familiar tropes about the dangers posed by unconstrained U.S. power and the need for a new "architecture of global security." While Putin's tone was unusually sharp, as former PM Primakov told the Ambassador afterwards, the substance of the remarks reflected well-known Russian complaints predating Putin's election. Putin's core message -- Moscow's concerns about encroachment on Russian interests through NATO enlargement and ballistic missile defense coupled with Russia's desire to work with the U.S. on nonproliferation and Europe on energy security -- was nothing new. The tough tone of his remarks had already been foreshadowed by Lavrov after his trip to Washington (the U.S. is Russia's "most difficult partner") and by Russian Ambassador Ushakov's February 1 Los Angeles Times interview.

¶4. (SBU) While Putin was blunt in describing Russia's views on the dangers posed by the U.S. "overstepping its national borders," his insistence that the economic rise of states like China and India will require corresponding political changes is a longstanding fixture in Russian policy, as was his privileging the UNSC. Lavrov has used similar logic recently to welcome the "rejection" of "15 years of international legal nihilism, unilateral response and reliance upon force." Lately, Russians have added a new element -- that U.S. and European criticism of Putin's centralization of power and hardball tactics on energy were designed to prevent Moscow's "return" to the world stage.

¶5. (SBU) On specifics, Putin hit familiar themes. He rehashed old grievances about the enlargement of NATO, while conflating U.S. moves such as ballistic missile defense negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic and discussions about bases in Romania and Bulgaria with Alliance policies. He argued that Russia's energy policies toward Europe were solely motivated by Moscow's desire for reciprocal treatment for Russian companies downstream. Putin underlined his interest in working with Russia's U.S. "friends" to strengthen the nonproliferation regime, while questioning why Iran had not sought to lower tensions by responding to the international community's concerns over Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, he defended Russia's arms sales to Syria and Iran.

¶6. (SBU) Putin reiterated several times that Russia was interested in cooperating with the U.S., and he went out of his way during the question and answer session to stress his respect and friendship with President Bush, arguing that he trusted the President when he said the U.S. and Russia should never be enemies again. Reflecting his personalized approach to diplomacy, Putin said that he could talk and reach agreements with the President. At the same, he stressed,

MOSCOW 00000613 002 OF 002

there was "nothing personal" about Russia's complaints about asymmetries in the bilateral relationship.

RUSSIAN RESPONSE TO MUNICH CONFERENCE

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¶7. (SBU) Speaking at a press conference on February 11, Sergey Ivanov tried to cool some of the sharper rhetoric engendered by Putin's speech, arguing that it was "not confrontational," but was simply Putin "speaking his mind" to some of Moscow's key partners (a line repeated by Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Sergey Prikhodko on a weekend talk show). Acting Foreign Minister Denisov made the same point to the Ambassador February 12. In a separate conversation, former PM Primakov (of all people) suggested that Putin might have gotten his points across more effectively with a little less bile in his tone. Russian talking heads and Duma members were almost unanimous in acknowledging that, while the tone was "tough," Putin was correct to enumerate Russia's redlines. A common theme in the commentary was that the bitter tone reflected longstanding Russian frustrations and that the U.S. and Europe both needed to take into account Russia's interests. In this view, Putin was saying, albeit bluntly, that Russia was ready to cooperate on certain issues, but that a strengthened Russia would defend its interests as it saw them.

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